

Falling Silent

Gerard Thomas Straub

In his book *No Man Is an Island*, Thomas Merton wrote: "There must be a time of day when the man who makes plans forgets his plans, and acts as if he had no plan at all. There must be a time of day when the man who has to speak falls very silent. And his mind forms no more propositions, and he asks himself: Did they have any meaning? There must be a time when a man of prayer goes to pray as if it were the first time in his life he had ever prayed; when the man of resolutions puts his resolutions aside as if they had all been broken, and he learns a different wisdom: distinguishing the sun from the moon, the stars from the darkness, the sea from the dry land, and the night sky from the shoulder of a hill" (260).

I am at that time of day. A time to fall silent and be still, a time to look deeply into the essence of my life, the essence of life itself, so much of which makes absolutely no sense. And because it makes no sense, I kept moving, kept doing in order not to be overcome by the apparent meaninglessness of it all.

I am at that time of day when I can give the day the time it deserves, the time required to allow something real to happen. I am at that time of day when I can be both silent and attentive . . . attentive to birds flying around my yard, and attentive to the flock of thoughts flying around inside of me.

I am at that time of day when I am free, free to find and love myself . . . and God. All the things that have been pulling at me for years, demanding my full attention, such as the endless responsibility of trying to right the injustice of chronic poverty, have suddenly vanished like a poorly constructed building in Haiti toppled by an earthquake.

I am at a *kairos* time of day, a time when I can give myself a chance to let go of everything I know in order to be carried along by the flow of all I do not know, the very flow of the mystery and true reality of life.

Speaking about prayer and the essence of what we truly need, Thomas Merton said, "We don't have to rush after it. It is there all the time, and if we give it time, it will make itself known to us." I am going to give it time. I am going to enter the invisible chamber of my soul where I will try to shut out all cares, worries, distractions, idle thoughts . . . shut out all but God as I wait for God. Oddly enough, say all the saints and mystics, God is already there. It is I who am missing, hidden in the rubble of my own life, buried under the weight of my countless faults, failures, mistakes, and illusions. Now is the time to cast off the burden of the past with all its missteps, concern for the future with all its sudden uncertainty and seek to see the face of God in this present moment, in this *kairos* time of day.

I pray that the emptiness and darkness does not scare me, does not prompt me to seek the false light of the world and all its empty promises and illusions. My past experience has taught

me that whenever the light of God truly penetrates my inner being, I am able to see clearly how far I am from God, how great the contrast is between who and what God is and who and what I am. This is a time for renewal, a time for rejuvenation, a time to enter the fullness of life.

We live in dark times, in an age of deep despair. Without an inner sense of depth and freedom we easily become oppressed by the darkness and despair, victims of our circumstances. With God, we can see and move beyond our limitations. God created us for growth, for an ever-expanding realization of the divinity within us. In God, there is true freedom. Outside of God, there is only bondage.

For me, seeing so much suffering in the massive slums of the world forced me to forget myself, my own limitations, and hear the silent voice of God calling me to respond, not only to the shameful injustice, but also to God's endless mercy and love. In seeing so many starving kids with bloated bellies and the overwhelming need of the poor, I became less concerned with my own subjective needs and harmful compulsions, and more aware of the self-emptying love of Christ which I needed to imitate to the best of my ability. But the noise of life sometimes distracted me and rendered me deaf to God and capable of only hearing my own confused and rambling voice.

Without the stillness and silence of solitude, we easily slip back into the mediocrity of a comfortable Christianity which is no match for the gun-toting, hopeless nihilism of postmodern life where everything is reduced to a commodity for sale, where unbridled greed has caused a catastrophic global economic recession, where materialism without qualification and sex without love are affirmed and championed, where mainstream corporations distribute pornography without shame or reproach, where dialogue has given way to vitriolic hate speech, where conflicts are settled by violence, where barbarous acts of terrorism threaten all, where blind religious fundamentalism passes for true faith, where drug addiction and alcoholism are rampant, where thousands of kids die every day from hunger, and where selfishness and individualism have created prisons of poverty and are destroying the earth.

In stillness and silence we are able to catch a glimmer of the interconnectivity of all life, to see the sun as our brother and the moon as our sister, to see that all of humanity and all of creation as part of our family. Even in solitude I am powerless to create (or even merit) the desire of my heart, the desire to see the face of God. It is only by grace that God gives us eyes to see, ears to hear, and fragility, to greater and greater heights of compassion for others.

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